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3 King Witnesses Provide Probe Hope

Washington — (AP) — Speaker Thomas P. O'Neill says the fate of the embattled House assassinations committee may hinge on whether three witnesses can provide new information on the murder of Dr. Martin Luther King Jr.

The identity of those three witnesses was not disclosed by O'Neill yesterday. One committee member said he believes James Earl Ray, convicted of murdering King, is not one of the three, though Ray says he wants to testify.

A source on the committee staff said later, however, that the panel is not ready to call any witnesses or conduct public hearings. Ray's lawyer, James Lesar, "He'd better not be (one of the witnesses) or I'd have to move a court injunction against it." Lesar said he did not think Ray's offer should be taken literally.

The speaker said after meeting with committee Democrats that they hope to salvage at least that much of the investigation from the ruins left by a dispute between Chairman Henry Gonzalez (D-Texas) and Richard A. Sprague, the panel's chief counsel. The committe has until March 31 to exist itself.

The committee's mandate is to investigate the assassinations of both civil rights leader King and President John F. Kennedy. But committe members spoke yesterday of either dropping the Kennedy investigation or delaying it while proceeding with the King investigation.

Asked if he believes the House should keep the committee alive, O'Neill said, "Well, let's just see what we're talking about with these three witnesses. I'm just led to believe that it's evidence the American people would be keenly interested in."

The speaker said he understands the three witnesses have not previously been called to testify because of the committee's internal problems caused by the Gonzalez-Sprague conflict. That dispute led Gonzalez to send O'Neill his resignation as chairman Wednesday.

O'Neill said he has not decided whether to forward Gonzalez's resignation letter to the House, which would vote on whether to accept it.

The speaker also said any decision on whether to fire Sprague as chief counsel would be up to a new chairman if the House accepts Gonzalez's resignation. O'Neill said he wanted to talk to Gonzalez, ill with the flu at his home in San Antonio Texas, before deciding whether to send the resignation to the House for action.

House Majority Leader Jim Wright, (D-Texas) and the assassinations committee's second-ranking Democrat, Rep. Richardson Preyer of North Carolina, told newsmen after yesterday's meeting that the assassinations committee will meet Monday, regardless whether Gonzalez is present.

House leaders said the committee will consider the King assassination evidence and a new committee, possibly including staff cuts, but will not get involved with "personalities," apparently referring to the Gonzalez-Sprague dispute.

Asked about propspects for the committee's survival, Preyer replied, "I would say right now the odds are long in view of all the problems that have come up." But he said he believes the committee can show that its continued existence is justified.